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ABSTRACT

The diversity of textbook and scholarly book reviewers makes it difficult for an author to deal with reviews in any systematic or preplanned manner. There are, however, several helpful working assumptions: (1) the reviewer is always right, (2) the author is always right in principle but frequently wrong in practice, (3) the publisher wants what you (the author) want, (4) reviewers' comments can and should be tested and evaluated, (5) the author should respond to reviews as a teacher who writes rather than as a writer who teaches, (6) reviews should be processed and revisions made under the guidance of a self-imposed ethical system, and (7) there are traps on the road of least effort. This last assumption can be illustrated by popular cliches to which authors sometimes resort--that the reviewer is either "stupid," "blind," or "atypical." On the contrary, the reviewer responds to the manuscript with the best of intentions and deserves the very same respect the author expects to receive. In the face of negative reviews, it is helpful to recall that many books ("Peyton Place" and "Jonathan Livingston Seagull," among them) were rejected innumerable times before finally being accepted for publication, and that the author and the publisher both want the same thing: a successful and popular book. It is more productive to look at a reviewer's suggestions with objectivity--from the point of view of a user of the book, or (if the book is a textbook) as the teacher of the course. (Three pages of notes are included.) (NKA)

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THE AUTHOR AND THE REVIEWERS

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The Author and the Reviewers

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After receiving, reading, digesting, and responding to well over 100 reviews of my books--some favorable and some unfavorable, some relevant and some irrelevant, some constructive and some destructive--it is not difficult to see that, like authors and like books, reviewers come with different competencies, different objectives and agenda, and widely different points of view.

Some reviewers offer only generalities--"the discussion of credibility is weak" or "the discussion of language is well done." Some reviewers comment on only the most minute details; spelling errors, split infinitives, and misplaced modifiers are all identified with considerable accuracy but about content this reviewer is silent.

Some reviewers hate textbooks--and perhaps textbook writers as well--and verbalize their dislike in a variety of ways: "we don't need another textbook in persuasion" or "public speaking is dead; we eliminated public speaking three years ago." Or, perhaps the worst, at least to a textbook author, "I don't believe in textbooks."

Some reviewers are so negative and so tactless that it's difficult for any author--though surely the beginning author will suffer the more--to see the comments objectively, through all this negativity.

Some reviewers have particular axes to grind; they function not as reviewers but as apologists for various approaches or areas of the field. They argue for a return to classical rhetoric or for abandoning classical rhetoric, for thorough coverage of the attitude change literature, for conversational analysis, and for or against just about every conceivable direction, emphasis, or trend.

Some reviewers are research oriented and want to see even a beginning textbook resemble a scholarly review of the literature. Others are classroom or student oriented; they remain silent on substance and devote their review to stressing the need for more and better pedagogy.

Some reviewers want theory, others want skills. Some want description, others want prescription. Some, of course, want

everything--and many of these want it neatly packaged in under 300 pages.

Some reviewers see the book only in terms of their own students, who may or may not be typical, and go through elaborate descriptions of their own course and demonstrate how the proposed manuscript will or will not fit their course. Sometimes this is followed by a lengthy discussion of the book they are writing and an invitation to the editor to see this new and more appropriate approach.

Given this situation, it is not surprising that some authors view some reviewers, along with Sir Thomas Beecham, the famed British conductor, as "drooling, driveling, doleful, depressing, dropsical drips."

Of course, some reviewers are brilliant. They are familiar with the literature in the field, have a clear sense of what students need and what students are capable of understanding, and know how to advance criticism that is clear, specific, and constructive. They know the kinds of information that an author needs and they know how to present it tactfully and objectively.

And these are only a small part of the reviewers an author might expect to meet on the journey from proposal to finished book.[1] Their diversity makes it difficult to deal with reviews in any systematic or pre-planned manner. Yet, I find several working assumptions to be helpful and it is these assumptions that I would like to consider here. These assumptions are all working assumptions; they may be right, they may be wrong. They are merely starting points that I have found helpful and that perhaps others will as well.

Actually, I'm quite convinced that careful attention to what reviewers have to say can--and often does--make the difference between a good book that becomes successful and a good book that dies a quick, but nevertheless painful, death. I doubt that reviewers can save a truly bad book.

Assumption 1. The reviewer is always right.

Having itemized just a few of the problems the author faces in dealing with the reviews, let me say that regardless of the kind of review or the kindness of the reviewer, each is important, each is helpful, and, most important, each is right. I operate with the assumption that B. F. Skinner used in responding to his graduate students who would complain that although they followed the reinforcement principles of their mentor exactly, the rat didn't run the maze or press the lever as it was supposed to do. To this Skinner would say, the rat is always right. The rat always knows what to do.

I try to follow that principle as a teacher and assume that the students are always right. If they don't pay attention, for

example, I assume that they are right not to pay attention. And so instead of getting disturbed at the lack of attention, I see this as a valuable source of feedback on my own effectiveness. Invariably I can find the problem in my own lecture or presentation, in the material I selected to present or in the way I presented it.

As an author, I assume that the reviewer--like Skinner's experimental white rats and my own students--is always right. The reviewer always knows what is right; the reviewer always knows what to do. Further, just as I wish to be regarded as someone trying to do the best job he can, I regard the reviewer in the same way--as someone who is busy with more pressing matters but who is responding to this manuscript with the best of intentions and doing the best job he or she can do. Put differently, I extend to the reviewer the very same academic respect that I expect to receive from him or her.[2]

To this basic assumption--fixed clearly in mind and reinforced before reading each review--I combine it with another assumption.

Assumption 2. The author is always right in principle but frequently wrong in practice.

If we were to assume that we, the authors, are wrong then we would simply be put into the position of abandoning our own ideas in favor of the reviewers'ideas. This clearly would be counterproductive. Instead, I assume that the reviewer is right but that I too am right even though I may have made errors in actualizing a concept or principle or in conceptualizing or explaining a theory or body of research.

The author needs to assume that regardless of what the reviewer has had to say, corrections can be made, the manuscript can be improved, and the book can be a success. This obviously is more true in cases of revisions than it is with new books but the assumption, I think, is valid generally.

In the face of negative reviews--even the most negative and tactless--I find it helpful to recall, for example, that Peyton Place was rejected by 14 different publishers. Jonathan Livingston Seagull was rejected 20 times. Irving Stone's Lust for Life was rejected 17 times with Doubleday claiming that "there is no way to sell a book about an unknown Dutch painter." Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Things Past was rejected for publication so often that Proust eventually paid for its publication himself.

But perhaps the best story is the one concerning Jerzy Kosinski's Steps, the novel that won the National Book Award in 1969. Six years after publication, the manuscript for Steps was retyped and sent to a number of publishers. In all 14 publishers, including Random House, the original publisher, and

13 literary agents rejected the manuscript, failing to recognize that not only had it already been published but that it had also achieved considerable critical and popular acclaim.[3]

The author also needs to consider the influence of the reviewer's suggested changes on the integrity of the book as a whole. And this is where the assumption that the author is right in principle takes on special importance. While some comments ask merely for additions or subtractions, others ask for drastic restructuring. They ask, in the extreme, for another or at least a drastically different book. My advice is to consider writing such a book, if you wish, but not to give up your original concept or perform radical surgery on your basic structure before giving it lots of thought and seeking additional input.

Assumption 3. The publisher wants what you want.

The author needs to work actively with the reviews and especially with the publisher throughout all stages of the book. Too often the new author wastes his time refuting the reviewers' observations and explaining to the publisher why these comments are meaningless. Of course, they may well be meaningless but that conclusion should only be reached after extensive and objective analysis of what the reviewer has to say, always with the working assumption that the reviewer is right.

I think the beginning author often forgets that the author and the publisher, although (perhaps) motivated by different goals, both want the same thing, a successful and popular book. This is not to say that authors and publishers are not natural enemies; in some matters they are. And I suspect that William James was not far wrong when he said, "Publishers are demons, there's no doubt about it." But, in their attention to reviews, they are not enemies or demons but cooperating co-workers attempting to achieve essentially the same objective.[4]

Recognize, too, that the publisher, in the form of your editor, for example, never reads your manuscript. In fact, the only one in the publishing house to read your manuscript is the copy editor (often a free lancer and not really a member of the publishing company), who knows nothing of your subject matter, and who will correct style and spelling and code the manuscript copy for the compositor. The publisher becomes familiar with your manuscript or book through the reviews, not from reading your work. There are probably exceptions here and I don't doubt that one or two editors do read some manuscripts.
But, the general rule is that editors do not read manuscripts or books.

Assumption 4. Reviewers' comments can and should be tested and evaluated.

Of course, we cannot avoid looking at reviews from the point of view of the author who may have worked on the book for years, and being hurt by criticism that may be perceived as unfair or inappropriate. Nor can we easily go to the publisher for advice. Gore Vidal was right when he observed that "It is not wise to solicit the opinions of publishers--they become proud if you do." Further, because your editor has not read your manuscript but may be reluctant to admit it, you may get more confused by seeking your editor's or publisher's advice.

But, you can and should test and evaluate the reviewer's suggestions by looking at them as a user of the book, as a teacher of the course. So, for example, ask yourself if this suggested change would go well with your students, in your classroom. As textbook writers we are especially fortunate in having the very audience we wish to reach as an experimental laboratory. We can easily test out our ideas in our own classrooms and at least try to examine more objectively the validity of the reviewer's observations.

For example, after the second edition of The Interpersonal Communication Book, a reviewer suggested that instead of including just eros and agape in the discussion of love that I include all 6 forms identified by John Alan Lee. In evaluating this comment, I tried out the suggestion in my own class. The response, as the reviewer suggested it would be, was extremely positive and so I included all six forms in subsequent editions.

Looking at the manuscript/book as a teacher with students to instruct, gives the author some objectivity, some needed distance. More important, however, is that this new perspective (often a perspective very similar to that assumed by the reviewer) encourages the author to impose a different set of criteria for evaluating the work. Frequently, this new perspective and these new criteria will clarify and even resolve differences of opinion between author and reviewer.

Assumption 5. Respond to reviews as a teacher who writes rather than as a writer who teaches.

In composing the textbook and especially in reading and responding to reviewers, the textbook author needs to think of himself or herself as a teacher who writes, never allowing the seemingly more appealing and more sophisticated persona, the writer who teaches, to become dominant. There are a number of good reasons for this assumption.

Perhaps the most important is that as writers we may easily lose track of the very specific audience we have to address. Unlike the novelist, the poet, or even the general nonfiction writer whose audience is more general and abstract, the textbook author's audience is very specific. Further, this specific audience has specific limitations and specific needs that must be addressed. If these limitations (for example, in vocabulary or

in background knowledge) are not recognized or if these needs (for example, to have real problems addressed or to have interest and attention maintained at all times or to have pedagogical devices intrude on otherwise deft prose) are not met, then we may fail to reach the very readers to whom we are directing our efforts.

When we think like writers we can easily get carried away with our own brilliance and wax enthusiastically and extensively on some minute philosophical issue that may be of interest to readers of Communication Monographs or Quarterly Journal of Speech but about which the beginning student and the instructor trying to work through a syllabus could not care less.

Further, and most relevant to our immeidate concerns, is that when we think of ourselves as writers who teach we may see our own writing as sacrosanct, rather like Caesar's wife--beyond reproach. And like Caesar we may feel the need to defend our writing from what we perceive to be reviewers' attacks. And that will be our loss and our downfall because the reviewer is always right.

Rather than assume the stance of the writer defending one's work, we need to align ourselves with the reviewer as fellow teachers trying to produce the best product for our colleagues and their students. Remember too that the publisher has specifically asked--at least in most cases--that the reviewer respond as a teacher of that specific course. You will, therefore, be in a much better position to understand what the reviewer means if you assume his or her frame of reference.

In reading and in responding to reviews, therefore, put yourself in the position of the teacher teaching the student and ask yourself not if what the reviewer suggests is true but why what the reviewer suggests is true for this audience.

Assumption 6. Reviews should be processed and revisions made under the guidance of a self-imposed ethical system.

This is by far the most difficult of all assumptions to work with on a day-to-day basis. But, in the long run it may well be the most important. Each author has or should have an ethical system which informs and guides his or her writings and revisions. Often, reviewers will object to a particular ethical position of an author or, as is more often the case, to a specific instance or illustration that is derived from one's ethical position. It is especially important that the author recognize that the objection involves ethical as well as substantive or pedagogical issues. Here are a few personal examples to illustrate the general assumption that reviews need to be examined in terms of their impact on the ethical system that governs the textbook.

For example, in 1975 when the first edition of The Interpersonal Communication Book was being reviewed, some reviewers objected to the elimination of the "generic" "he," "him," and "his." Instead, I had used the masculine and feminine pronouns together or changed the construction to the plural form. To my knowledge, no other textbook had done this at this point in time. Their objections were not centered on the elimination of sexist references but rather on the stylistic awkwardness that resulted. Students wouldn't like it and it would provide a poor model of writing for them to follow, they claimed. While I would admit to the stylistic awkwardness--at least in that first edition--the significant issue to my mind was not a stylistic but an ethical one. Obviously, the sexist references had to go and the stylistic awkwardness was the price that had to be paid.

Another example is the use of "Pat" and "Chris" as characters in sample dialogues and examples. One reviewer thought the names were inappropriate because one could not tell who was the man and who was the woman. "Pat" and "Chris" actually serve extremely well. First, they avoid the sexist tendency to have, for example, the man initiate interpersonal interactions or to ask for the date--which was the original impetus for these names. Second, they avoid the assumption that all relationships are between women and men. Third, I think they help to provide some useful lessons relevant to a wide variety of issues in interpersonal communication.

In The Interpersonal Communication Book, Human Communication, and The Elements of Public Speaking as in my own teaching I have used the notion of choice as a general ethical guideline. Basically, under this assumption my task, whether as a teacher or as a textbook author, is to increase the students' available options. My job is to enlarge the students' potential choices and to provide students with the evidence and argument that are currently available and that bear on these several choices. My function is to increase their arsenal of useful and effective communication strategies and to provide them with the necessary information for selecting the choices that will be right for them in the specific situation in which they find themselves.

At times this assumption forces me to provide two or three alternative views on a particular communication interaction or behavior. Some reviewers may prefer that the issues be simplified so that they and their students do not have to select among alternatives but rather can simply swallow what is written. While I admit that this notion of choice does complicate the issues a bit and does result in a somewhat longer text than most, it is--in this ethical system at least--essential. It is essential that the students be taught--by example and not merely by pronouncement--that communication is complex and that each one

of us has to make choices and that we are responsible for these choices. We cannot--whether we are students, teachers, or textbook authors--avoid responsibility by avoiding the making of choices or having one or another make the choices for us.[5]

Assumption 7. There are traps on the road of least effort.

Authors need to be particularly careful that they do not take the easy path, the path of least resistance, and conclude that the book is fine as it is and that the reviewers' comments can be dismissed. The major traps along this line of thinking can be examined in terms of the popular clichés to which authors seem frequently to resort. We need to learn to avoid these popular but detrimental author clichés. Here are just three.

1. The reviewer-is-stupid cliché.

This cliche takes at least two forms. In the first form we say something like, "this reviewer didn't understand what I wanted to do, the course I was writing for, or my distinctive point of view." In the second form we say something like, "this reviewer doesn't know the literature, doesn't know students, doesn't know the field, doesn't know how a book is written, or doesn't know the competition.

Regardless of whether we claim a lack of understanding or a lack of knowledge and regardless of the specific manifestation of this cliche, the assumption is made that the reviewer doesn't know what he or she is talking about. My advice here is to recall our initial assumption: the reviewer is always right. If the reviewer said that a chapter was not clear, then proceed on the assumption that the chapter needs clarification and actively seek to clarify it. If the reviewer says that students will not relate to the examples used, then proceed on the assumption that the examples can be changed and made more effective, and actively seek out more relevant examples. Deviate from this assumption only after you have seriously considered and objectively evaluated the reviewers suggestions.

2. The reviewer-is-blind cliché.

The situation here is similar to the student in public speaking who is told that he or she didn't maintain attention and then proceeds to show you 17 attention-getting devices all neatly noted in the outline. My comment to the student is simple: the audience is always right. Similarly, if the reviewer says that I didn't discuss apprehension or touch avoidance or phatic communion, then I look around for reasons why that was said. Even though I could easily point to the pages on which these

concepts were discussed, I force myself to consider at least some of the possible reasons why the reviewer commented on their absence. Perhaps the reviewer didn't see them because they were in unexpected places; maybe I should move these discussions. Perhaps these discussions didn't have their own clearly identifiable heading or were buried in a lengthy discussion of some related topic; maybe I should insert some descriptive headings. Perhaps I used an untraditional label for these areas; maybe I should use terms more easily recognized.

Often, of course, the reviewer has not gone through the manuscript with any great care--certainly never enough care from the author's point of view--and so may miss much that is correctly and clearly positioned. Still, remember: the reviewer is always right. Many instructors making adoption decisions also go through the book without any great care. [If anyone doubts that this is true, just recall how many texts you selected that you thought would work but that fell flat and that both you and the students hated.] And this reviewer's seemingly too general comments--far from being useless--may provide you with the very insight you need to appeal to this potential user. I think publishers have recognized this very problem and have responded to it by including, for example, both a brief and a detailed Table of Contents.

If we operate on the assumption that the reviewer is correct, we will look for possible ways to improve the manuscript or ways to highlight our material so that it quickly appeals to even the busiest instructor. The alternative--to criticize the reviewer--seems an unproductive and ultimately self-defeating procedure.

3. The reviewer-is-atypical cliché.

Especially when the criticisms are extreme and when they ask for extensive changes, authors may be tempted to conclude that this reviewer is not representative or typical of the potential users of the book. That is surely a convenient way out of the problem. But, it is a most ineffective way because you are throwing away or dismissing information that could prove valuable in improving your manuscript. Rather, assume that the reviewer is representative until you can prove otherwise. Further, let's face it, there aren't that many unique people around.

These then are just a few of the many clichés that get in the way of using reviews and reviewers to improve your manuscript and just a few assumptions that I have found useful, though it took twenty years to internalize them. It would be easy to continue with assumptions an author might find helpful but, after all, Lillian Hellman was right: "writers talk too much."

Notes

[1] I omit from this consideration those reviewers who are paid lots of money by the publisher--on the surface for the review--but really as an inducement to consider the text for adoption, particularly if they have an extremely large course. These "political reviews" are, of course, a form of academic blackmail and bribery and any publisher that pays for them should be abandoned by any and all ethical authors. And any instructor who solicits, demands, or accepts such bribery should be exposed along with the New York politicians. The monies exchanged may differ greatly between the instructor and the political boss but the offense is equally repulsive. These publishers and these instructors are benefiting at the expense of the students who are forced to use books that would not otherwise be adopted. In these cases, it is the money exchanged and not the quality of the book that determines adoption decisions.

[2] In a letter responding to a preliminary version of this paper, Richard Katula asked me to consider two questions, both of which are relevant to this assumption. First, he asked, "Are reviewers picked for the right reasons, and, are reviewers competent (generally speaking and in your own experience)?" Second, he asked, "In your opinion does the review process facilitate innovation? Do reviewers allow for creative approaches, or, are they generally conservative? You seem to have encountered people of every stripe, but I am curious whether they can be classified on the permanence and change scale." I suspect that Richard was suggesting--although I may be misreading his intention--that many reviewers are incompetent and often stifle creativity and innovation. Whether or not I am misreading his intention, his questions are important ones because they are often asked by text writers and the underlying assumptions that I read in his questions are frequently made by text writers. So, these questions need to be addressed. First, let me respond to the competence issue. When I first started to write textbooks, I received reviews from only incompetent reviewers. Now, I receive reviews from only competent reviewers. Of course, the reviewers haven't changed. But, I have. More directly, the answer is "yes," all reviewers are competent as reviewers. This does not mean that they are all competent in terms of subject matter, nor does it mean that they are competent stylists or educational methodologists. I'm sure many of them are incompetent in their

knowledge of subject matter, style, and methodology. But, as reviewers, all are competent.

The second question concerned creativity and innovation and asked whether reviewers allow for sufficient creative and innovative approaches. The answer to this question is similar to the answer to the first question. The reviewers allow for exactly the right amount of creativity-conservativeness that the course calls for. Most often, reviewers opt for less creativity than the author would want. But, again, the reviewer is right because the reviewer is telling the textbook author how much difference he or she will tolerate before tossing your textbook onto the heap of the "innovative but unused and unuseables." Barbara Muller, the Scott Foresman editor, noted in a paper she read at a recent convention that the general rule is that a textbook must be approximately 80% like the current popular texts and only approximately 20% different. I do think that my own texts, and those of many others as well, have broken this "80-20 rule" and succeeded to became popular and standard texts. But, for the most part, that rule seems to describe the majority of textbooks that do become popular. Publishers, of course, did not pull this "rule" out of the air. That rule--much as we might all hate it and recognize that it is too restrictive especially in a field that is undergoing such rapid change--and I do find this rule both hateful and overly restrictive--is derived from what teachers--you and me--will and will not adopt as textbooks. Recognize too with even a 20% change, considerable innovation can be introduced in a relatively short period of 5 to 10 years. The beginning textbook author, however, often wants to accomplish this total change in one shot and, fortunately or unfortunately, most teachers are not ready for that. I suspect that at least part of the reason for this is that it is a great deal easier to be innovative than it is to be usefully innovative. Another part of the reason, I suspect, is that most teachers, although we like to think of ourselves as the most creative, open, and innovative of all professionals, are actually quite conservative when it comes to selecting educational materials.

Textbooks, at least introductory ones, should--for the most part--reflect the literature of the field, the major emphases, and the current trends. Substantive and pedagogical innovation should be presented first in our journals and second in our texts. Put differently, such innovation should first pass the scrutiny of our colleagues through a blind-review process.

3 These and other useful (especially to the beginning textbook author) rejection examples may be found in John White's Rejection (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1982).

4 This assumption of the author-as-teacher-not-writer must be severely restricted to the writing and reviewing processes and must not be allowed to surface when dealing with publishers and especially with contracts and other technical details. Here an author profile will provide the much better and much needed defense. There is little reason we have to repeat our "low paying but highly rewarding" job as teachers to our job as textbook writers. But that's another story.

5 It is crucial here to make an attempt to identify an important distinction concerning this notion of choice. This distinction surely needs further development and clarification. But, it may be suggested here. One kind of choice is that which textbook authors make in their role as academic gatekeepers (see my "Intrapersonal Communication in Interpersonal Communication," paper presented at the Seventy-second Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Chicago, November 15, 1986). Here it is essential that textbook authors make numerous and significant choices for teachers and students alike. In fact, textbook authors frequently define a field of study for many teachers, for example, teachers teaching outside their area of specialization, and for most students. We cannot ignore the fact that a large part of our function is to make informed choices for teachers and students in terms of both content and emphasis. A second kind of choice, however, concerns the behavioral options presented to the student in the textbook. This is the kind of choice I refer to in Assumption Six. Clearly these types of choices are not pure forms and overlap considerably. In actual practice, textbook authors do make numerous choices of both kinds. I'm not sure a textbook could be written in which the author did not make both of these kinds of choices. Nevertheless, I think it helps authors to recognize the function of choice in their roles as academic gatekeepers and in the behavioral options presented to students. The awareness of this inevitability of choice and the types of choices, I think, fosters a certain needed author humility and a recognition that other forms and models of presentation are legitimate and potentially valid.